



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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By: Staff Sgt. Karima Turner

Military funeral honors program pays tribute to Alaskans in large numbers

CAMP DENALI, Alaska—The Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program is paying tribute to veterans all across Alaska in record numbers, honoring more than 400 veterans last year alone.

During fiscal year 2011, the Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program provided an honor guard detail for 444 military funerals throughout Alaska. According to Charles Einarson, Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program state coordinator, each year that number continues to grow.

"Last year, in fiscal year 2011 we had a 230 percent increase over fiscal year 2010," Einarson said. "So far this year, we've already conducted half the number of services that we conducted in 2011."

Part of that growth stems from an increased awareness about the program. There is also a push to spread the word as to who is eligible for funeral honors.

"Previously, nobody knew about the Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program, and they didn't think that the active duty military funeral honors programs would handle a Guardsman's funeral, so many veterans passed away and didn't receive honors," Einarson said. "Now that we are becoming more well-known, we are being utilized like we should. People also like it when we perform the funeral honors because we are from their towns; we are Alaskans too."

Eight Soldiers from the Alaska Army National Guard, five of whom have attended the Military Funeral Honors course in Arlington, Va., comprise the full-time team and are authorized to wear the honor guard tab on their uniforms. Twenty Soldiers augment the Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program part-time and assist on an on-call basis throughout the state.

"Whenever a service member passes away in the state, whether he or she is a one-year veteran or a 20-year retiree, we travel to the site and provide final honors for the family – flag fold, firing party – whatever we can based on what is authorized for that service member," Einarson said.

He added that often times he will get a phone call from one of his part-time honor guard members or from a church in one of the remote villages requesting support.

"Having traditional Guardsmen as part-time honor guards located around the state is beneficial because when we get requests from some of the villages, instead of flying several honor guard members out there, we can send maybe one or two to join the Soldier already in the village and perform military funeral honors," Einarson said.

He said the honor guard's role is important during such a delicate time for families. Honor guard members perform their job with pride and go to great lengths to adhere to military customs so that their tribute captures the essence of a person's military service. In Alaska, the honor guard covers a large geographical area, and Einarson hopes he can grow the team.

"We have traveled across the state to render these last honors for Soldiers," Einarson said. "I would like to create two complete honor guard teams, one in Anchorage and one in Fairbanks, and I want them to be able to rival Arlington – that's the kind of program I came from and that's the kind I'd like to develop here."

That commitment to creating and maintaining a top notch funeral honors team encourages members to put forward their best every day.

"Being a full-time honor guard member is competitive," Einarson explained. "Every 90 days, Soldiers have to prove they are meeting the standards of the team. Whether it's physical fitness, performance or attitude, there's a whole list of criteria to remain on this team."

Einarson said because of current funding, the Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program isn't adding any additional full-time slots right now, but the program is constantly looking for new members who want to help.

"This is a great opportunity for Soldiers looking to volunteer," he said. "We have 20 part-time honor guard members throughout the state, but we are always looking for more volunteers, especially in western Alaska because the Alaska Army National Guard unit based out of Bethel is currently deployed."

With Alaska home to 77,000 veterans, the Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors Program plays a pivotal role in paying tribute to those who have served the country. Each team member feels honored to be a part of this process.

"This is the most rewarding job I've ever had, and it's important that we can provide this service," Einarson said. "It's the last benefit the Soldier will receive and our country's way of saying thank you and giving that final farewell. It's closure."

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Members of the Alaska National Guard Military Funeral Honors Team stand ready during funeral services at Fort Richardson National Cemetery December 2011. The Military Funeral Honors Team provides military honors for Alaska's 77,000 veterans. Photo: Staff Sgt. Karima Turner, Alaska National Guard Public Affairs Office.

YouTube link to "Alaska Army National Guard Military Funeral Honors":

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEfoQ6nhENI&list=UU-mL7o0dsBJj_jHI-vrDm3Q&index=2&feature=plcp